Backstage

First Shot On 'Assassins'

Signature to Do Sondheim Show

By Pamela Sommers
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Stephen Sondheim fans, take note. the Arlington-based, year-old Signature Theatre has been given the go-ahead to mount the first area production of the composer's latest musical, the controversial "Assassins." To make things even more interesting, Signature Artistic Director Eric Schaeffer plans to produce the show—a nightmarish look into the psyches of Lee Harvey Oswald, John Wilkes Booth, Squeaky Fromme and all the rest who have gone after America's chief executives—in the autumn of '92, in the midst of the presidential campaign.

According to Schaeffer, Music Theater International, which handles the rights to all of Sondheim's work, has received about 60 requests from theaters itching to do "Assassins"—even though the show ran for only two months off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons and received less-than-stellar reviews. (In addition to Signature's, Chicago and London productions are in the works.) Schaeffer himself hasn't even seen the show—he tried, but couldn't get his hands on a ticket—but the recently released score, he says, is reason enough to tackle the project.

A gifted director and designer, Schaeffer believes that Signature's coup is a result of his and his associates' ongoing commitment to Sondheim's art. The production of "Sunday in the Park With George" that he directed for the Arlington Players boasted, among other riches, sets and costumes from the original Broadway production. And the Signature company just began a run of "Sweeney Todd" (also directed by Schaeffer), the bloody tale of the Demon Barber of Fleet Street, at the Gunston Arts Center.

"From one killer to the next," quips the mild-mannered Schaeffer. . . .